



# ShareFair Broke Barriers,

## Put Rural Farmers on a Pedestal

-By Anthony Mugo

**T**he recently concluded AgKnowledge ShareFair held in Addis Ababa Ethiopia broke many barriers towards making agricultural knowledge more accessible to those who need it most. In numerous ways, it lived up to its billing in achieving one of its key aims: showcasing how African 'talents' are creating, sharing and using rural knowledge - at the grassroots, in research and policy, and through intermediaries.

A distinguishing element of the Fair, which ran between October 18 and 21, 2010, was the close integration between the proceedings there and emerging ICT-based information sharing platforms. Every learning pathway, focus group, marketplace and even *Bunna* (a special Ethiopian meeting space with coffee, wireless internet connection and conversation zone) was "present" in some virtual space including Twitter, the ShareFair Wiki and blog, the *Daily Tail* (a daily ShareFair newspaper), tens of video blips and hundreds of pictures posted online. The first of its kind in Africa, it set itself apart by facilitating unfettered *conversations* rather than *presentations* (use of power point was discouraged and use of stories, drama, song and dance and ordinary face to face exchanges encouraged).



Francis Kiarahu, Flora Nzambuli and Julius Matei on the podium during a feedback session on farmers' participation at the event.



Flora Nzambuli leads the participants in her Climate Change adaptation song.

The main objective of the organizers, who were led by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and which was hosted at the Addis Ababa ILRI Campus, was to have all players in small-scale agriculture and livestock production in Africa connect, and share knowledge. "We wanted to showcase the ways agricultural and rural knowledge in and of Africa is created, shared, communicated, and put to use," noted Peter Ballantyne, ILRI's Head of Knowledge Management and Information Services and the Fair's main coordinator.

For ALIN and other actors involved in knowledge sharing at remote rural areas in Africa, the Fair offered an unprecedented opportunity to three rural farmers from Kenya. Ms. Florence Nzamburi (Flora to all she met) took to many platforms with a message on climate change delivered mainly in song. At different sessions, she narrated about processes followed in setting up farmer field schools in her area and initiatives being taken to mitigate the negative effects of climate change. "The most important thing I learnt from the Fair was that everybody including researchers and farmers has a role to play in achieving both food security and adaptation to climate change," she told *Baobab* after returning to her farm in Mutomo, Eastern Kenya. Flora is the Chair of the Advisory Committee of Mutomo *Maarifa* (Knowledge) centre. "The Fair offered all of us a chance to share what people at different levels and in different fields are doing with

respect to climate change so that everybody can put into practice what they have learnt."

From another part of Kenya, Mr. Francis Kiarahu, from Ng'arua area in Laikipia County in the Rift Valley, a member of ALIN's Ng'arua *Maarifa* centre, singled out the role of language in facilitating or impeding agriculture knowledge sharing: "Due to the language barrier and low literacy levels, I learned that it is important to device ways of delivering information to the grassroots farmers who may not be educated. There are barriers inhibiting the transfer of knowledge from experts to the rural farmer in the village," observed Mr. Kiarahu who needed an interpreter to make his contributions at the Fair.

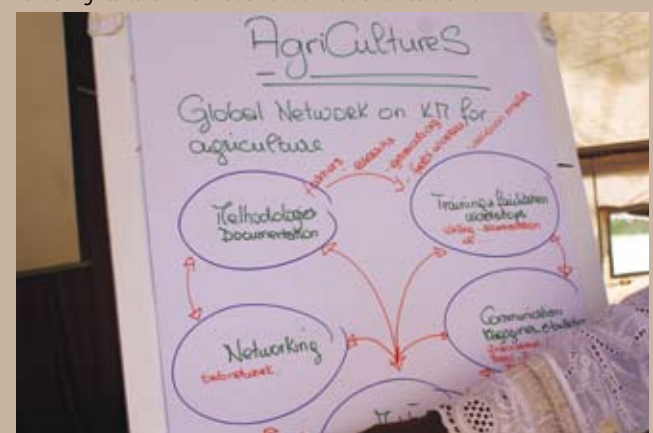
An avid documenter in pictures and on-farm records, Mr. Kiarahu got the opportunity to showcase his achievements in ground water harvesting and how the technology has enabled him to have year-round production of a wide variety of crops and livestock, Ng'arua being an arid area. Through technologies learned at ALIN's *Maarifa* centre, he uses various methods of preservation and value addition of fruits and tubers deriving substantial income as a result. His stand at the Fair, where he had placed samples of his commodities, was a great attraction to many curious visitors.

The opportunity to share indigenous knowledge was not to be missed. The third farmer in ALIN's

Flora Nzambuli being interviewed on her climate song use in her community.



Part of Agricultural Information dissemination discussions.







Julius Matei making a presentation at the ShareFair.



Francis Kiarahu exhibiting dried produce from his farm at the ShareFair.

team Mr. Julius Matei, a technology enthusiast who is also the Community Knowledge Facilitator (CKF) at Kyuso *Maarifa* centre, a dry area of Eastern Kenya, presented indigenous techniques of non-chemical pest management. In one example, he demonstrated the use of goat droppings to control weevils in stored cereals and Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) leaves to control field pests. Participants were fascinated by his obvious experience in harnessing knowledge “from the Web to the field and from field to the Web” through the use of the internet based portal that focuses Online Information System on Non-Chemical Pest Management in the Tropics (OISAT) – see [www.oisat.org](http://www.oisat.org).

“I learnt that there is valuable information held within communities and entrusted to elders. Effort should be made to document this community knowledge and to share it for the benefit of the wider community who need to use it now to increase farm productivity,” observed Mr. Matei, who has since opened a Facebook account through ALIN’s Mutomo *Maarifa* centre and exchanged correspondence with people he met at the Fair.

The presence of farmers was well felt and acknowledged by participants. Roxanna Samii, a Knowledge Management practitioner and social media strategist affiliated to IFAD writing in her blog after the Fair noted: “We finally had the pleasure of hearing the voices of farmers - the very people that we serve. The farmers were indeed

the ‘missing link’ in other Share Fairs. Perhaps the biggest lesson learnt for future share fairs is to make sure that we have adequate representation from all the people who we work with and serve - this means smallholder farmers, producers but also decision makers.”

Her observation echoed that of the keynote speaker at the opening of the Fair, Owen Barder who in his captivating opening presentation (see: <http://www.owen.org/wp-content/uploads/101019-Addis-Share-Fair.pdf>) noted the emerging need for knowledge to move from institutions to communities. For this to be possible, he was of the view that knowledge needs to get to infomediaries as much as possible. Through them it should go through what he called “social filtering” which is made possible by the numerous new options and spaces where people share, modify and make use of knowledge to make their day to day decisions.

*More from the Agknowledge Share Fair can be found on*

- ShareFair blog: <http://tinyurl.com/sfaddisblog>
- Tweets: <http://tinyurl.com/sfaddistweets>
- Photos: <http://tinyurl.com/sfaddisphotos>
- Videos: <http://tinyurl.com/sfaddisyoutube>
- Podcasts: <http://share-fair.podomatic.com/>

## About the Writer

Anthony Mugo is the Programmes Director, ALIN. E-mail: [amugo@alin.net](mailto:amugo@alin.net)

Some of the donkeys used to display information materials.



Social Media reporters at the AgKnowledge ShareFair.



Photos: Anthony Mugo, Julius Matei and Susan Mwangi